

“Krizevici means Junction” Working with Young Returnees in Sensitive Areas

Interview with Lahira Sejfija and Adnan Harbic,
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During and after the war, there has been a massive “brain-drain” in Bosnia. Many young people have left the country and opinion polls show that 60 percent would leave if they could. What are the causes of this?

Lahira Sejfija: Many young people, especially those from rural areas, would very much like to emigrate. They want a better future, a working infrastructure in their local areas, an education and a job to secure their livelihoods. An exceptionally large percentage of the unemployed in this region are young people, and no suitable vocational training opportunities exist. The situation is particularly bad for girls, especially those from the villages, as there are hardly any opportunities for them to even attend secondary school. It is now ten years after the war and the situation for young people has not really changed. Young people are most likely to find jobs in the small shops, restaurants and cafés that have recently been set up. The owners like employing young people, but this work is generally illicit and not covered by contracts. They do not register them for insurance, they exploit them as cheap labour and often do not even pay them their month’s wages. If the young people complain and demand their wages, they dismiss them and employ new people – after all, there are enough people willing to work. So another person gets the job.

Adnan Harbic: There are hardly any regular employment opportunities for young school-leavers and the shadow economy is their only option. I also believe that the poor state of the economy is the primary cause of emigration. Another problem is that the state has not yet been able to legislate on many matters, for instance in the fields of education and training, as the state structures in Bosnia-Herzegovina are still very confused. We have the two entities that are structured differently, the Federation having eleven cantons and the Republika Srpska with another, more centralised political system. The higher state institutions are very weak and this means that many problems come “from above”.

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Lahira Sejfija: As we saw at the local government elections in October 2004, many young people are quite disillusioned. Turnout was again very low and it transpired that only 25% of young people actually voted. Many are fed up with seeing how the country's many problems are not being resolved but just becoming subsumed by nationalist politics, and also that all areas in politics are involved in a power struggle along ethnic divides. Many young Bosnians, particularly those born during and after the war, are less burdened by the ethnopolitical divisions. They seek normal contact with other young people, including those from other ethnic groups. However, many do not even have the chance to do this as they are always having to think about how they can access training so that they can get a reasonable job to secure their futures. Those who can look abroad. In view of the current situation in education, it is becoming increasingly difficult to advise young people to plan a future in Bosnia. Education as a whole is still based on completely outmoded laws and standards, and, more importantly, young people do not receive any practical training. Young job-seekers cannot get jobs as they have no practical experience and all their learning comes from books. And without a job they cannot get any practical experience. It is a vicious circle. Young people from families who already own private companies or factories may have a chance of gaining experience, training and a job, but all the others are in danger of drifting into illegal shadow economies, particularly drug dealing.

How do you assess the international efforts, of the OSCE for instance, to reform the education sector? Have they adopted the right approach?

Adnan Harbic: The OSCE's efforts are really laudable but the problem is that it is taking rather a long time. Another very high priority would be to finally reform higher education. Courses still follow outdated, socialist principles, professors are seen as the ultimate authority and act as sole decision-makers, and outmoded teaching methods are still being used. The international community has therefore rightly put pressure on Bosnia to change this, but the OSCE can only act as a mediator in this respect. How it progresses will ultimately depend not only on the OSCE but primarily on the people employed in the schools and universities; the directors, professors and, most importantly, the education ministries as well. These are the people who will inspire or obstruct the whole process and they must send out positive signals. This is a very slow process. For example, the Bologna Declaration [to harmonise university education standards to the European level, M.F.] has been accepted by the Federation parliament, and the University of Sarajevo was given the green light to introduce the Bologna criteria next semester. This is also happening here in Tuzla and it has already been implemented in Mostar. However, I am not so sure that much will happen in the RS.

The international community's efforts are also directed towards education in schools. Has school policy created further ethnic segregation in Eastern Bosnia, where you launched the "Young People Build the Future" project? How has the situation there developed in the context of the return process?

Adnan Harbic: Segregation exists. However, we cannot lay the blame for this entirely on government policy as complicated dynamics are involved. Families can decide themselves which school they want to send their children to. The state does not stipulate that children must attend a specific school in their locality. This naturally gives people the option to decide for themselves and that is their democratic right. We now have the problem that hardly any Serbs want to attend schools in communities where the majority of residents are Muslim, and young Muslims do not wish to go to schools where the majority are Serbs. This is clearly evident in the region where we work and is a real problem. The OSCE has been trying for three years to give its support to a reform and standardisation of the school system. This is making progress, albeit slowly, but it will certainly be some years before all the disputed issues are resolved. The key issue, of course, is which language (Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian) should be used to teach the students and there are also arguments about the teaching of history. All three ethnic groups in Bosnia have different interpretations of history and they also have different ways of looking at social problems in general. A solution that suits all groups has been sought at international level but this is very difficult as there are major differences on these issues. It is not about the views of individuals, as individual people are more likely to be able to come to an understanding on different viewpoints. It is about the collective views of entire ethnic groups and this requires solutions to be found at a higher level.

Lahira Sejfija: In our experience, young people find it extremely difficult to integrate when they move from the urban to the rural environment. Young returnees may be relatively better educated and many speak another language. Integration is made even more difficult as they are confronted with new schools' policy regulations and also different curricula. There is no coordination between the school curricula in Republika Srpska and Tuzla canton or the Federation. In the RS, for example, children first learn Cyrillic script and then Latin script in Year Three, but in the Federation it is the other way around. This is one of the problems faced by returnees from abroad who have not learned Cyrillic.

What effects do these problems have on your work with young people, parents and schools?

Adnan Harbic: Our approach is firstly to discuss problems openly and secondly to identify the people's common interests and engage with them. In

Eastern Bosnia we have the problem that the schools are really in a critically, and I would even say alarmingly, poor condition, in terms of both materials and educational opportunities. Many schools cannot even find the money for basic items such as paper. It is clear that all students, both Serb and Muslim, prefer to access those schools and training programmes that offer good qualifications. For example, if computers, tools and machinery are available, if they offer something concrete, not just in theory but also in practice, this is attractive for all the students. We have therefore assisted some schools in our area to identify German partners to help them with materials and equipment for their schools.

One of the goals of the project in Eastern Bosnia, in which you have been involved for three years, is to reduce the differences between urban and rural areas. What are these differences?

Adnan Harbic: Education and employment opportunities for school-leavers are only available in the urban centres, not in the small towns and rural areas. The people there either leave or become impoverished. After their children leave primary school, many people here simply do not have the money to send them to secondary schools. Those who have a bit of money are able to send their children to grammar or technical secondary schools, but only if these children are living in a town from the age of 15. But even here, the quality of schooling is not always good. There are almost 2,000 pupils per school in the Eastern Bosnian communities of Zvornik and Kalesija, with classes often exceeding 35 pupils. That is simply too many and young people cannot be expected to develop in these circumstances.

Lahira Sejfiija: At the start of this project I had several conversations with Irfanka Pasegic, our psychologist. After all, our project also includes a psychosocial element – drug counselling, psychological counselling and workshops on the subject “*Der Klügere gibt nicht nach*” (“When the going gets tough, the tough get going”). It is also a case of teaching social skills and training young people as multipliers so they themselves can work with other youth groups or in their schools, for example on drug prevention. The psychologist noticed that there were great differences in the levels of awareness between the young people from the cities and those who grew up in rural areas. Those from the countryside were a bit more reserved and insecure. After working with them for two and a half years, I spoke to her again two months ago and she reported that she now hardly notices any difference between the behaviour of the young people from the urban centres and those from the rural areas. They have learned so much and developed so much awareness. So I felt that we had achieved something for our target group.

Is there an urban-rural conflict in Bosnia?

Adnan Harbic: Looking at the last ten years, the situation is like this. There has been a lot of migration since the start of the war in 1992. Many people had to leave the villages and flee to the towns. For example, Tuzla has gained around 30,000 to 50,000 new inhabitants via this process. Many were grateful that they were somehow able to find a refuge here, for example in Simin Han, where Ipak started its youth work. The refugees then remained here until the end of the 1990s. Some became settled and integrated into the community (around 3,000 to 4,000 people according to official statistics in 2004, but the real figure is probably higher). Others went abroad and some (around 50 percent) returned to the rural areas, partly because they had no choice but to return and were not able to stay in the city. This triggered many fears. Many who had become accustomed to urban life were afraid of returning to the countryside, partly because life is much more difficult here. These regions receive hardly any investment.

You need to be aware that 60 percent of the Bosnian population live in rural areas. However, the villages do not have good road or transport links to the towns and are poorly supplied with services. For example, there are hardly any healthcare facilities and security is also not very well advanced. This makes life very hard. Up in Krizevici, where our youth centre is located, there are two police officers to look after ten small villages. The communities simply have no money to invest in infrastructure and services. Imagine a place with 2,000 inhabitants only having a budget of 10,000 Marks per year. It is barely able to cover its electricity costs.

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What is life actually like in Eastern Bosnia? What are the expectations of the people returning to the village community of Krizevici, for example?

Lahira Sejfića: Internet access or even a bicycle is just a distant dream. People simply have to organise their lives in a completely different way. There is nothing but nature here, a few half-finished houses, a bit of farming and nowhere for young people to meet. This is a pity as young people represent the potential to develop new social conditions in this region. Young people always form friendships very quickly and they also try and make contact with their peers in the other ethnic group. This is the starting-point for our project: the *youth centre with associated training facilities and a youth cooperative in Krizevici*.

Adnan Harbic: The following example best describes the situation. At the end of 2004, we organised a conference with the young people to which the candidates for the mayoral offices were invited. The young people were asked to write wish lists and publicly state what they expected from the future mayors. They identified quite simple things: a football pitch, a school, repairs to the water

supply system and the roads, better communication links and facilities for young people. Amongst the first five priorities, the water supply headed all the wish lists, which indicates that not even basic human needs are being fulfilled. The roads came second, facilities for activities were in third place and in fourth were education grants. I would say that all these are quite basic requirements.

The destruction and violent past of Eastern Bosnia have left their marks on the region. Whole areas were depopulated in the war. The commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the massacre at Srebrenica took place a few days ago and more mass graves were discovered. Not all the dead have been identified and a number of war criminals are still at large. You must always come up against the past in your work. What role does the past play and how do you deal with this sensitive issue?

Lahira Sejfića: The past plays an important role. The war, displacement and return have traumatised some young people. Even those born after the war are often influenced by the pressures to which their parents are exposed and which remind them of the past. If we had more resources, we would also do more for the parents to help them overcome some of their mistrust. Those in the Bosniak villages have no trust at all. If there is a school in a Serb village two or three kilometres away, the parents sometimes prevent the children from attending this school and send them to one 20 kilometres away in a Bosniak community. That puts a great strain on the children. For our team, this means that we must choose our words very carefully and ensure that nothing can be interpreted as being nationalistic. We, as individuals, have not aligned ourselves to these ethnic groups.

What role does the past play and how do we deal with it? We are confronted with these issues every day. When we launched the project, the young people did not want to talk about the past at all. Relations between the villages and the different ethnic groups were taboo subjects, as were the atrocities. At the start, they just did not want to talk about these issues at all. In the third year of our project when we organised an international youth encounter with a multiethnic group, I talked about the history of Ipak and told them that it had been founded as a reaction to the massacre of young people in the centre of Tuzla (in May 1995). A young man from Zvornik reacted to this quite negatively and asked: “Why do we always have to talk about that event?” I replied: “We have to talk about it but I did not say that we had to apportion blame on any group. What we have to learn from this is that we have to stand up for tolerance, democracy and human rights, that everyone has the same rights to life and that such events must never happen again.” He was happy with my answer. The group then slowly began to open up and started to talk about the past themselves. We know that some of our young people lost their fathers at Srebrenica and that others lost relatives who have either

not been found or not been identified. We also talk about the responsibility for the war. However, this is a difficult issue as we must do it in such a way as to not spoil the new friendships between the young people who work together in our projects.

Who is actually returning to Eastern Bosnia? Is it mainly older people or are there also families with children?

Adnan Harbic: When we started in 2002, there were 120 children in the primary school in Krizevici. The figure is now 200, so there are 80 more pupils who will enter nine years of schooling at the secondary school. In the neighbouring village there were around 600 pupils then, and now there are almost 900. So it cannot be said that all returnee communities are like “old people’s homes”. Children are being born who will go to school and so on, and I can also say with certainty that the number of children at the grammar schools has increased as well.

How can you motivate young people in such a region to engage in the future?

Adnan Harbic: That is really the sixty-four million dollar question. One thing we do is provide them with training opportunities – language and IT courses are very popular – but also courses in agriculture and woodwork. Besides this we offer opportunities for shared leisure activities. Since the youth centre opened in April 2004, the young people have had a facility where they can meet from 12 noon until 9 pm. It is a drop-in centre. They can play table tennis, darts, or football in front of the centre. They can spend their time how they like, apart from smoking and drinking, of course. This is the most important aspect, because when they meet, they exchange information and plan activities. The third component that we offer is employment. We simply wanted to offer opportunities for people to earn some money and we therefore began to develop the cooperative to match young people with employment opportunities. Another motivational element is the international youth encounters, which are received very positively. When people come for festivals or sports events from outside, especially from other European countries, this is a great incentive for our young people to undertake shared activities with them. It is a good source of motivation.

Your approach is therefore to combine four dimensions: education, international encounters, networking and employment?


Adnan Harbic: Yes, the training opportunities, leisure activities and youth encounters are already running and in the future we want to focus more on employment.

The village community of Krizevici is almost entirely inhabited by Bosniak returnees. However, in the surrounding areas, there are villages that are almost entirely populated by Bosnian Serb inhabitants. How have you managed to get young people from these different communities to meet and work together?

Adnan Harbic: Krizevici is predominantly inhabited by Muslims, but the mountain 200 metres away from the youth centre has a Serb population, as does the whole strip of land around four to ten kilometres behind it. (There were no Croat inhabitants here previously and there are none now.) We are kind of in the middle. On an administrative level, we come under Krizevici but are linked to all the villages. That is very important in terms of our ethos, which is to work with both ethnic groups, and was also essential for the preparation phase. I believe that the key issue [the acceptance of the project, M.F.] was decided in advance, even before the centre was built. During that phase we spent quite a lot of time visiting all the schools, speaking to the teachers at length and giving them extensive support. We organised campaigns [e.g. art competitions and public relations work] in the primary and secondary schools. We also held some seminars with youth organisations on the subject of democratic education. We were constantly on the road providing information and trying to present ourselves as a serious organisation that really supported the issues of young people. Above all, we involved the young people in the further development of the project and gave them tasks to do. They understand that we are not going to organise everything for them and that they must take part as well, and they also see us giving them responsibility for initiatives. They respect us, presumably due to the fact that this is an ongoing project, we all work very hard and do more than we originally planned, and we always respond to new ideas. People come from various villages and communities in Zvornik and the neighbouring communities to take part in regular activities. However, young people from the entire region of Eastern Bosnia also attend special activities and events.

Lahira Sejfiija: The contact was really very spontaneous. We discovered that young people who live together in neighbouring villages, but with no previous contact with one another, actually meet through our projects. We did not specifically organise this, it just happened, they got to know each other by playing in mixed groups in football matches or when preparing for workshops and activities. Then it was: "We'll see you in the disco later". This shows that young people really want normal relationships and normal contact. Once, in a meeting, a young man from a Serb village was greeted with applause by young people from a Bosniak village. This was simply a spontaneous human reaction.

Adnan Harbic: We tried to integrate people in such a way as to give them responsibility for specific activities as quickly as possible, and we will continue



to do this. We want the people to learn to take the initiative. One is now training to be a disc jockey and that means that he will help to organise the disco. This is a responsible task as he has to inform the police and find people to act as stewards. We have to get to know these people well and the others must also trust them. Otherwise, problems will arise and everything will be down to us to resolve. We now have two people from Krizevici in our core team, local people who work in the centre on an ongoing basis and are employed by us.

One of your goals is also to create a network of young people in the surrounding village communities. How is this project going and what exactly are you doing?

Lahira Sejfija: At the start, we built up and strengthened contacts with 36 villages lying between three large towns in Bosnia, namely Tuzla, Zvornik and Bijeljina. This was an inter-entity network. Young people from Kalesija or Sapna in the Federation meet with others from the Republika Srpska, from Zvornik, for example. Some of them already know one another through workshops organised by NGOs in the area of youth work, so not just through us. However, we then established an “activist core” with a number of these young people and this operates regularly. In order to achieve this, we visited each village, talked to the young people, gave them information and motivated them to take part. Various informal groups were then formed in the 36 villages and we are in constant contact with them. The youth centre is used by all of these young people. Some come to us regularly, occasionally they arrange a meeting in their villages and we discuss this with them, or they use the youth centre facilities for their conferences.

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When you arrived in this region that has practically nothing, I am sure that everyone’s hopes were suddenly pinned on you. Were you not confronted with people’s incredibly high expectations?

Lahira Sejfija: At the beginning, some young people from the neighbouring villages had unrealistic expectations. They thought that this would be a youth centre for this one village and so they wanted one for their village as well. They were also some returnees who thought that they should be rewarded for deciding to return and that they were simply entitled to it. When we started building the greenhouses, many young people thought everyone was getting a free greenhouse. Many are used to thinking this way due to the fact that they, as refugees, were supplied with aid packages for years and no demands were made on them in return. We then explained to them that they had to work and take part in training courses and that we would not just be giving them things. The young people reacted in various ways to this, some showing defiance, but we

had expected that. We did not put any pressure on them but just slowly continued with our work and managed to convince them that it would be sensible to work with us even though we were not giving them any aid packages. The start of the project was therefore a very difficult phase. First, we had to convince people that we were not there to distribute aid but to support them if they wanted to change things or had ideas that they wanted to translate into reality. We also had to make them aware that we were there for the young people of the whole region and not just Krizevici.

Was your work supported by the parents? Are they all behind the project and its multiethnic approach? Or have there also been caution, scepticism and problems?

Adnan Harbic: 150 young people coming to the centre every day indicates that most parents do not have a problem with it. Some parents may have been sceptical at the start. Many thought that a humanitarian organisation was coming to build a centre and would then go away and leave everything to the community, which would then cause problems. There are simply too many people in Bosnia-Herzegovina who feel betrayed, and some of the interventions by humanitarian organisations have contributed to this. Basically, many people do not trust anything or anyone any more. For example, when we announced at the opening ceremony that there would be an international exchange and a link between Berlin and Krizevici, many of the parents laughed, but they take it seriously now. They have seen that something tangible has been created and that it was not just empty talk. They now see that the project is up and running and is moving in a very positive direction.

We also involved the parents in our work in a practical way, for example in clearing the site before the centre was built. Some are now involved in various activities. For example, we have a woman who has invested more than 200 hours of voluntary work in the agriculture course. She visits regularly, has two children and says: "I have stayed here because of you". She has since become president of the women's organisation and is also trying to change things in this area. These things mean a lot in this situation simply because people like her can persuade the others to do something as well. We also have a man who is very active in the carpentry course. He also has two children and wants to change things for them. We just have to continue to work with these individual parents, who really contribute a lot and have very positive attitudes, and continue to encourage their resourcefulness. We therefore also give awards, not only to the children but also to parents, for participating in our activities – "Diplomas for the best parents". This recognition is very important. It always has a positive impact in the villages where they live.

Is the centre used by boys and girls to the same degree? What do you do to ensure that they get the same opportunities, for instance in the areas of education and employment?

Adnan Harbic: This year we have around 60 percent boys and 40 percent girls on the agriculture course. However, there have been times when the percentage of women has been 70 percent and that of men 30 percent. At present, up to 90 percent of the participants on the carpentry course are boys. Some girls from Zvornik were also interested in it but were not able to participate due to transport problems. We must find solutions for this. The creative workshop involved 19 girls and three boys. The girls are clearly more interested in design and the boys more in the physical aspect of the crafts so we have tried to create a better link between creative workshops and carpentry. With regard to the leisure activities, it varies. Looking at the activities as a whole, the ratio is perhaps 55-60 percent male and 40-45 percent female. That is really great and has far exceeded our expectations.

Some girls have also taken part in the marketing course. One of them is employed in a business next to the centre so her marketing skills are proving very useful. One woman who gives needlework courses for us also runs a small tailoring and dressmaking business from her home. We should promote this model in the future so that people can be taught how to produce goods in their own homes and generate income. Agriculture is certainly important but it is not enough. People may be able to work in the fields during the spring and summer, but many could carry out other kinds of skilled crafts at home during the winter. We can then support them, via the cooperative, in identifying sales opportunities for their products or services. At the international festival in May 2004, we sold a lot of the people's needlecraft and products from the carpentry workshop. We also send some items to Germany to be sold at festivals there, for example as souvenirs. In time, this just has to be put on a more professional footing. The cooperative also places people in companies or reconstruction projects.

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What precisely are your expectations of the cooperative and how does it work?

Adnan Harbic: The cooperative model of employment and work placement has something of a tradition in these parts. As a school-leaver twenty years ago, I got my first job via a youth cooperative. I started off as a labourer and later also took on management responsibility. As soon as people in a company notice someone working hard and being committed, they will be given the opportunity to train for more important work and assume more responsibility. It is the first step from which other steps can be reached. I see the point of a cooperative as giving the people the chance to get onto the first rung of the ladder.

How is the youth cooperative in Krizevici different from the socialist model that prevailed before the war in former Yugoslavia?

Adnan Harbic: At that time, young people had to be members of the Socialist Party in order to participate. It was really a party youth organisation that found occasional and seasonal work for young people whilst also acting as an information exchange. Of course, our cooperative today is based on a different model. It functions in a democratic way, which means the members have meetings and decide collectively what should be done. It is intended to act more as an employment agency whilst buying products and services from the members at the same time. The main objective of the Krizevici cooperative is to locate work opportunities and train people for tasks that are needed in the region. This is most important as young school-leavers have no practical experience and have never worked with machinery. They have only ever been allowed to observe and have never had the chance to try things for themselves. However, the only way of learning is through experience and by doing something in practice. That is the reason why we chose this approach and I believe it is unique in this region. Unfortunately the schools cannot provide this as they don't offer any vocational training or teach any basic business skills. However, we plan to work on this with a vocational school and with communities and schools which are interested in setting up this type of training course. For us, it is not just a case of training people in skilled crafts and agriculture; they also need support with marketing. We therefore offer business start-up workshops as well.

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In my opinion, identifying training and employment opportunities is our most important role. Even when the centre was being built, we noticed how important it was to get the young people involved in the build and allow some of them to earn a bit of money while doing so. Even at that stage, we were applying the basic principles governing the youth cooperative's future work, and the cooperative continues to follow this approach. If schools and classrooms need to be renovated as part of a reconstruction project, the coordinator of the youth cooperative says: "We have two skilled tradespersons and ten people who can work as labourers. We can take on these and these aspects of the work." The cooperative then takes part in the bid along with other companies. It is usually labouring work but there is sometimes work for people who have specific skills.

48 people currently belong to the cooperative and these are predominantly, but not exclusively, young people. The director of the school in Oraovac, for example, is also a member. It is open to everyone on principle and also helps the process of exchanging information. At one time, for example, many people in the "Desanka Maksimovic" school in Oraovac (in the Republika Srpska) were

interested in the agriculture course, but the vocational school is in Sapna on the other side of the entity border in the Federation. The college in Sapna informed the people in Oraovac that if any of them wanted to take a higher education course in agriculture after completing their primary and secondary education, it would reimburse these students' travel costs. We are hoping that this incentive will enable around 20 to 50 Serb nationals to travel from Oraovac to Sapna next year and attend the vocational school there. This is a huge step towards bringing the Serb and Muslim communities closer together, also across the entity border.

Did Ipak contribute to establishing the contact between these schools?

Adnan Harbic: Yes, as they had not had any meetings before then. We invited them. That is the problem: these five neighbouring communities have been living completely separately up until now. Until we came, there was not a single organisation that did not have some kind of ethnic classification or bias. Everything was determined by ethnicity. We tried to overcome this. We asked: "People, what are you interested in doing? We have something to offer." The activities that are aimed at networking and connecting people form the nucleus of our work as the Ipak team. The liaison work is very important, as is the fact that we are always here. We meet people, people meet us, they get to know each other on the trips in our minibus or in the youth centre in Krizevici, overcome their reserve and finally say: "Who cares whether we are from Zvornik or Osmaci? Let's do something together."

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I am interested in the international element of your work. You are supported by the German organisation *Schüler Helfen Leben* and a German support organisation (Ipak e.V.) and you organise a lot of encounters with youth groups in Germany and Switzerland. What significance does that have for your work in the region? Does it contribute to people's perception of you as being above the ethnic divides?

Lahira Sejfiija: The international element is very important, the international support on the one hand and the youth exchanges on the other. The Ipak organisation would not exist without international support and we would not be developing any youth projects here in Bosnia. Everything that we get is international support. It will take many years before NGOs specialising in youth work receive any government support here in Bosnia. Without this international support, nothing would be done in Bosnia in terms of civil society and youth development.

Adnan Harbic: We are also still registered as an international organisation as we cannot carry out inter-entity activities with our local Tuzla-registered organisation. But the local organisation runs the youth centre in Simin Han and


is fully integrated into our activities. Having both is an optimum solution as it gives us more flexibility.

Lahira Sejfiija: International youth encounters are very important for our young people. In certain villages where we work, some young people have no contact at all with young people in other countries. They have no idea of what it is like to live in another country and have a completely idealised and fairytale-like image of life in the EU countries. They think that the people there have everything in life and that it all just comes to them automatically. They don't realise that people there also have to work hard. Youth encounters give them the opportunity to get to know other countries. They are able to see how the different societies function along with their advantages and disadvantages, that although they may offer opportunities, the people have to organise themselves effectively in order to make use of them. For some of the young people who were with us in Hamburg for two weeks in 2004, it was the first time that they had been over the Bosnian border and at the end, they said: "I thought that everything would just be waiting for you there but it's not like that." It is important for us to make this clear. The young people can build up contacts with people abroad, exchange opinions and learn something about other cultures. At the same time, however, they learn that the image of people having everything because the sun shines brighter elsewhere than in Bosnia is not quite realistic.

We sometimes hear complaints from other international organisations and NGOs working for young people in Bosnia. Some arrive with good intentions and are disappointed when they find that the young people are not prepared to work voluntarily and support their communities for free. What are your experiences?

Lahira Sejfiija: On the one hand, Bosnian society has taken over some of the elements of the socialist system; on the other, it has to deal with the consequences of the war. In the socialist era, it was not at all usual to do voluntary, unpaid work. It did not appeal to people; the attitude was: "He's daft, working for free". That can only be changed slowly and we must work on increasing people's self-awareness at the same time. That is a prerequisite for the development of a genuine civil society.

In 1998, when I started to work for Ipak in a youth centre in Simin Han, I could not imagine that anyone would accept responsibility on a voluntary basis. Now, in 2005, we have four young volunteers who have taken on individual responsibilities. The Internet club is run by young people who have keys to the facility and who keep an eye on the billiard table and other equipment, and some young people organise discos themselves. It is a slow process and cannot be accomplished by applying pressure or issuing instructions. It can only be



achieved through learning processes that change the way that people do things and develop the attitude that voluntary work is not something that someone does because they're daft, but because it benefits their personal development and offers an opportunity to build up contacts and move forward. We still have a lot of work to do in this respect in Bosnia.

Adnan Harbic: Experience has shown that when people really want to do something, they are also motivated to do it voluntarily, although this may of course only be on an occasional basis due to obligations at home and school, and also because they still want to hang out with their friends. I understand completely if they want to be paid for some of the activities. Young people who have experienced so much poverty want something for themselves. That is not meant in a negative way. In some situations, it is important to support young people here. For larger activities such as our festival, for example, we sometimes pay them small, symbolic fees for helping to set it up. That's not a problem if they only help out occasionally, for example by putting up a stage or something like that. But it can get a bit expensive if they work on a project for several days. I also think that young people want to earn money in order to feel that their efforts are being recognised. That is fine. We are not talking about a lot of money here, of course, just a symbol of our respect for them.

But it is also important to you that young people become involved in following politics and shaping their community life. Are they prepared to do this?

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Adnan Harbic: We have to explain the concept of civic engagement and the workings of democracy to an awful lot of young people, along with the fact that the only way to change anything is through participation in the local communities. They have to learn to work with established institutions and realise that they must also invest time and effort in this. For example, before the elections in September 2004, we organised seminars called "*Kleine demokratische Schule*" (Small School of Democracy) which showed us just how uninformed the young people were. Many had no idea at all of how our political system works. But once we'd explained the principles to them and shown them that they could also form their own organisations, you could clearly see something changing. At the start, three organisations were formed in the municipal area of Zvornik, followed by three at once in Djulici, Krizevici and Osmaci. Finally, there were 11 organisations that were all striving to form a youth council at community level. It was agreed that the 11 organisations would elect two youth representatives and send these to local council meetings. They will probably not be able to change anything overnight but at least the local community now seems to be more interested in the concerns of young people than it was previously.

Another important aspect is the inter-entity regional youth network that encompasses Zvornik, Kalesija, Sapna, Osmaci and Tuzla. Zvornik and Osmaci have primarily Serb inhabitants and Sapna and Kalesija are predominantly Muslim communities. We want to use this network to give young people information and advice so that they become more aware of their legal rights. We are doing this on an interethnic and inter-entity basis, which in this form is unique in Bosnia at present. I think that it is becoming clear that the project in Krizevici is really acting as a sort of junction.

What do you mean by that?


Adnan Harbic: The Bosnian word “*Kriz*” means cross and “*Krizevici*” means junction or convergence point and therefore describes a place where many paths cross and come together. In our project and in the centre at Krizevici, many initiatives and organisations really do cross over and converge. So the name of the place has actually released a certain symbolic energy as the project has become a convergence point for many creative developments.

What has frustrated or annoyed you most in the last few years?

Lahira Sejfija: The process of building the centre frustrated me, the way a woman member of staff at the local authority deliberately delayed the building approval again and again so that I had to interrupt my holiday and even get the Mayor of Zvornik back from his holiday to ensure that we received the permit in time.

Adnan Harbic: I have sometimes felt really helpless, for example in situations where sorting out minor issues has taken me endless amounts of time. If I think about how much time we wasted trying to arrange the renovation of the bridge in front of the youth centre in Krizevici. We tried to do this for two years, telling around 200 people about it and asking them for help, including Zvornik municipality at the start, then the village community of Krizevici, and also the Americans, UMCOR, UNDP, UNHCR, and many other organisations. The bridge eventually collapsed three days before the big festival in May and it was only with the help of a local man from the village that we were able to make emergency repairs with some old materials that we had. We are now two years down the line and we have limited expectations that it will be renovated this summer. It takes so much time, energy and patience to sort out really minor issues, and it often brings no rewards.

It was also sometimes frustrating for me to appreciate that people need a lot more time to understand certain issues and take responsibility for things. Initially, most of them were very passive. You have to start small and take things



slow. It is really difficult to define indicators to ascertain whether there has been any change and the precise form that this change takes. Change sometimes takes 18, 20 or 25 years for some people to accept and we have the task of achieving these results in one or two years with people who also have to go to school, work, take care of their families and have all sorts of problems. That is also unrealistic. We can only encourage them again and again and say: “Don’t give up, you must carry on.” It would be really absurd to say that we have had a positive effect on all the people who we have worked with. But I do think that we have changed something by combining the various approaches that I have explained here, these four or five dimensions that we are trying to develop, and for me that is wonderful. In this sense I have become much more content and calm within myself.

Lahira Sejfiija: I also had great difficulty at first in coping with the pace of progress around here. Many people in Bosnia want to work quite slowly, “*polako, polako*”, and drink coffee. I am different in this respect and have been strongly influenced by Germany where I lived and worked during the war. Upon my return, I had to reacclimatise to the fact that the clocks tick more slowly in Bosnia, that it simply takes longer to organise things and that the pace of life as a whole is slower than in other countries. I often had to stop and say to myself: This is not right; these people need time to get used to the fact that things change. The difficulty lies in adapting to the dynamic here and at the same time not losing sight of your goals. I do not think there is any other way. If you exert too much pressure, you will not get a true civil society. Civic engagement is not generated through pressure. However, even here attitudes are gradually changing.

Another thing that makes me angry is the way that parents raise their daughters. Many parents take the view that girls in the villages do not deserve to stay at school; they are supposed to wait until someone marries them. I cannot understand this traditional view. The sons get everything and the daughters get nothing. They are used to doing everything for their brothers, father and mother, serving the whole family and doing the housework, and they do nothing at all for themselves. This is a cultural phenomenon of village life. Girls who have been “socialised” in urban areas act differently and have a different standard of education. I have evidence, for example, that 90 percent of girls in the villages where we work are not able to continue their education after finishing secondary school. The parents have enough money to buy a ticket for their sons to travel to school but not for their daughters. We must find ways of changing this so that they at least have the opportunity to stay at school. Our youth centre, which they visit regularly, is really the only stimulus they have. I occasionally bring newspapers into the centre, as reading a newspaper is something that girls cannot

imagine doing. They are hardly aware of their rights and that is the thing that angers me the most. It makes me very angry. I would really like to change this and motivate girls to become more pro-active in the future, also in a political sense.


Often these stereotypes – the picture of what girls may or may not do – are influenced by the expectations that boys have of girls and vice versa. How do you attempt to break through these stereotypes?

Lahira Sejfiija: The young people in the centre treat each other differently, more as equals. The fundamental problem still lies with the families, in the older generations that exert pressure, often on the brothers as well. Many things must happen on different levels for things to change. In our youth cooperative, this means that we must really target the girls and try to offer them training courses, even ones that were not traditionally for women. For example, it is unusual for a girl to work with wood and take a carpentry course, but why not? Maybe girls are better at it. However, the traditional view is that certain kinds of work, for example driving, are not suitable for girls. But girls can become drivers too – why not? However, many parents think that girls cannot possibly become drivers. This type of attitude can be only changed slowly and this will not be achieved with a single project.

What has made you most enthusiastic in your work in the last three years?

Lahira Sejfiija: The best moment for me was when we opened the youth centre and workshop in Krizevici and saw twice as many people as we had expected, around 1,000 young people in total. That surprised us a lot. The visit to Krizevici by the international community's High Representative also made me happy. I felt it was really important that he spoke directly to the young people. It gave many young people a sense that: "We are also important to the future of this country as this man is taking time to talk to us." He also explained to them that he is a normal person with some scope for action, but that he cannot sort out the lives of all the people in Bosnia. He said that people have to take action themselves to deal with their own issues, and that includes young people. They must motivate themselves and do something to make their country attractive. They themselves must take action to organise their training and employment opportunities. They themselves must commit to fighting corruption and organise demonstrations, etc.

I am very proud of the fact that some of the young people have said to us that they have decided to stay. They are saying: "We want to take action ourselves to change things and make our country more attractive and we want



to get involved. We cannot just sit around and wait.” These young people used to be disillusioned and lethargic and were convinced that it was not possible to change anything at all. They just waited for someone to come from abroad or an international organisation and make the changes for them. One young man whom I know from the youth centre in Simin Han (he also did a cabinet-making course with us), and who now lives in Sapna and visits us regularly in Krizevici, told me: “Since Ipak has come into my life, I have decided that this is my country, I want to build my future here. I am not going anywhere else. Ipak has changed everything in my life and I want to stay here.” That was also a very beautiful and moving moment for me.

I must also mention the international festival that we organised in May 2005. There was simply an incredible atmosphere there, with young people from Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Switzerland and Germany coming together to do something with our young people in Eastern Bosnia. The suggestion came from the young people themselves. They wanted to organise a peace festival to mark the 10th anniversary of the mortar attack in 1995 that killed many young people in the centre of Tuzla. The festival ran for five days, allowing many opportunities for encounters between different cultures, and there was a youth camp in Krizevici and a large concert in Tuzla. A band from Pancevo (Serbia) gave a fantastic concert and told us: “The Serb customs officers at the border asked us: Are you going to play for the Bosniaks? And we replied: We are going to play for the young people.” I saw many happy faces and heard lots of laughter during these days in Krizevici. You could hear different languages, everyone was communicating in different ways but everything worked, like in a team. The young people sent a message of peace to the world, which was: “We want to meet each other here, have fun and build a normal life. We never want another war.” That was fantastic, a wonderful experience.

Adnan Harbic: I am happy about the fact that we have, to a large degree, achieved the goals that we set for this project. I am certainly very pleased with the dynamics of the project and it really is moving in a positive direction. I also see progress in the fact that over the last year or so, people in our locality have stopped talking about “refugees” and are talking about “returnees”. The terminology is important. I see this as progress and a sign of success and believe that our project may have contributed to the fact that people are now defined as “returnees” and no longer as “refugees”. They have returned to the places where they were born and lived before the war. That is perhaps the greatest thing that could be achieved.

Then, of course, there were the unforgettable moments like the international festival in May 2005 and the conference with the mayoral candidates

in the run-up to the elections in the autumn of 2004 [these were the first direct mayoral elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina]. We had not originally planned this, the idea came from the young people in the region. We invited mayoral candidates from seven village communities. Seven came and two of those were ultimately elected mayors of their communities. The young people questioned the potential mayors about their aims in terms of youth policy, and asked them to realistically describe the goals that they would implement if they became mayor. The candidates had to formulate five measures for their respective regions and then sign these declarations of intent. These declarations were then published on the Internet. We are now going to try to implement the projects in conjunction with the municipalities. The event that we organised was really unusual for our circumstances.

Lahira Sejfija: That was the first time that this type of public dialogue had taken place in a public forum between young people from the villages and politicians and administrations. All the youth groups from the 36 villages took part in this conference and we worked for two days. On the first day, the candidates had to introduce themselves to the young people, draw a self-portrait and describe themselves as people. That was very unusual for them: they were not used to talking with young people about their lives, and some became stressed about the unusual methods. The reactions were very interesting. One of the candidates initially refused to draw a portrait and accused us of “playing” with him, but then took part after all. On the second day we formed four groups and each worked on lists of tasks together with the politicians. When the groups presented their work you could see that the priorities were very similar. The candidates then confirmed, by signing placards, that they would implement these specific aims if they were elected. Two of them were elected. We then organised a special trip with the young people and also got an appointment with the new mayor in the community of Sapna.

Were the young people’s demands met?

Adnan Harbic: The mayor of Sapna has really kept to what he had promised the young people and has done a lot of work to ensure that the road connections and water supply, for example, are restored. The community made a room available in a house for the young people that they then reconstructed and repaired. These were really visible successes for them and they were able to see what they had achieved in the last eight months.